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Planet of the Masks

They are amongst us already. They are unpredictable, reckless, and overwhelmed by their own hormonal changes. They are, we are, teens. Sadly this comes with a certain stigma, a series of generalizations that foster mistrust of teenagers. Please join me on a journey of sight, a journey of sound, a journey of consciousness. Welcome to the teenage zone. There is a certain expectation of teenagers. We are expected to behave perfectly, and never do anything considered immoral and wrong. If we fail in this task, we become hoodlums. We are demoted in the eyes of society, and possibly even react accordingly. I realize these are generalizations, and not everyone believes exactly this, but you will find that very few people can expect teens to simply be standard, average people.

All teens do is listen to oppressively loud rap music and wear pants that make walking a high improbability. The idea of what is cool is emulation of folks who likely make a point of bad choices and consistently talk about drugs and objectifying women. This process is known as socialization. It is how society teaches us what is acceptable, and what not to do. It's how we learn who we are. It affects all of us, whether we know it or not. It is brought to us by virtue of our family, friends, and our media consumption. Back to the question of what is cool for teens nowadays. Is this really what our culture values? What happened to the teens heading off into the woods for a couple days to go fishing? It seems like such a radical difference, and in some respects, it is. However, we still have the central motivation of going to hang with our friends without adult supervision (read: adult interference). It's an opportunity to be independent, and try our hands at being adults ourselves. However, in recent years, going into the woods for a few days without a responsible adult has become something of an issue, as it is thought that this is a good way for teens to get themselves in trouble. Teens still need this experience, so they head to other means of independence.

Folks seem to generally distrust us, and I can't say I blame them. We do have an alarming tendency to sort of fall neatly into the negative stereotypes cast for us (roughly one percent of all males between the ages of 10 and 17 have committed assault according to the database of the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention), but occasionally little bits stick out of the mold. These little bits are sanded down, so we fit into these conventions. This mold can cast all sorts of connotations upon us teenagers. For instance, people say we have to appear a certain way, so, we do. Our peers may like certain types of music, so, in order to belong, we listen to it. We may not even genuinely like this stuff. It may just be a sham, a mask.

I have many masks, not literally, but metaphorically, in order to fit into this culture, this seeming planet, of masks. I have to pretend to be this kid, this studious person typing an essay instead of going out and riding my bike, in order to prevent people from getting upset with me as a person. When I walk up to you after you call me over, with a grin on my face and a "How's it going?" coming smoothly out of my mouth, I may not even care about you. Polite society. Polite socialization. Seeing underneath the mask, seeing a real person, has become an intimate matter. It

has become a question of whether the wearer trusts his environment to take off the mask, and let things in. So, it's like a pragmatic costume, that we don when we need the safety of disguise. This disguise, that lets us be who we want others to see us as.

My mask is a literal mask. It has it's own symbology and purpose. The rough exterior represents the many layers of emotion that we as teens have to wear. It is also demonstrative of a lack of true conformity to what we are supposed to be. The gray, stony face is a method of introducing the sort of cast, conformed, sculpted role we have to fill, in order to make our influences, those who have socialized us, accept and welcome us. It is also demonstrative of how not everything is black and white, like it appears on the surface. The face-paint represents the ways we have to change ourselves to fit in with our peers, and adapt to the world around us. It also represents the ways in which I've been socialized. The stylized mountain lion petroglyph illustrates my love of the outdoors, which I have been brought into by my family, and by my peers. The keyboard portrays my use of music, and how music has changed me mentally, and turned me into a more artistic person. Finally, the Durango Shin-Budo-Kai Aikido logo on my mouth shows what's inside. It shows my philosophy, of trying to avoid harming others without getting harmed myself. This part is sort of a deviation from the socialization I've received, the goal of being a fighter, a dominant person, is not relevant with aikido. It's not the sort of person who I want to be. It's not me. These elements show a more peaceful path, a route that leads to who I want to be.